

The Shepherd

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FROM THE FATHERS

‘HAVE YOU NOT SEEN LAZARUS a little while ago throw off death as though it were sleep? Have you not seen him come forth, clothed in his cerements, at the words: Come forth? Have you not seen the dead obedient to His voice, when He bade him come? And the winding sheet did not hinder him. Have you not seen how His voice restored a man dissolving in death? He Who did that can also do this. He Who raised His own servant, much more shall He himself be raised up. He Who gave life again to a body already corrupting shall not leave Himself in death.’

SAINT AMPHILOCHIUS OF ICONIUM, † 400 A.D.

‘SO THAT prolonged sadness might not afflict the troubled minds of His disciples, with a wondrous promptness He cut short the promised time of three days [i.e. in the Tomb]; so that though the number of days remained, the time was shortened, by joining the last part of the first day and the first part of the third day to the entire second day. And so the Resurrection of our Saviour brought it about that Christ’s soul should not be long detained in Hades, nor His body in the sepulchre. And so swift was the revivifying of His uncorrupted body, that we have here the appearance of sleep rather than of death; for the Divinity, which departed not from either substance of His assumed humanity, joined together by Its power what by Its power it had sundered.’

SAINT LEO THE GREAT, POPE OF ROME, † 461 A.D.

PASCHA, THE LORD'S PASCHA!

The Paschal Message of the Ever-memorable
Archbishop Averky, 1960

It is the day of Resurrection, let us be radiant, O ye peoples; Pascha, the Lord's Pascha; for Christ God hath brought us from death unto life, and from earth unto Heaven as we sing the triumphant hymn.

Irmos of the First Ode of the Paschal Canon

BY THE MERCY OF GOD, we have again been deemed worthy to live through to the celebration of the greatest and most joyous of the Christian festivals - to 'the feast of feasts and festival of festivals', the radiant resurrection of Christ, Holy Pascha.

With love we send all our readers that paschal greeting which is unchangingly new, full of the power of grace, and forever joy-filled:

CHRIST IS RISEN!

How fortunate we, Orthodox Christians, are, that we have this marvellous festival, that, every year, forgetting all of life's tribulations and the afflictions of the present insidious earthly life, even to us it is granted to enjoy 'this great and luminous festival'! Indeed there is no faith more joyous than our Orthodox faith. And this is because it breathes with the joy of the Lord's Resurrection.

The Resurrection of Christ is the chief corner stone of our holy faith. For this reason its celebration is replete with special solemnity and rejoicing.

'This festival', says that great father of the Church, Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus, 'is more festive than all the festivals. For

the whole world it embodies festivity, renewal and salvation. This festival is the chief and the highest of all the feasts’.

It is highly significant that at the present time our holy Orthodox Church alone celebrates ‘this chosen and holy day’ as did the first Christians in deep antiquity, and this fact in itself bears the strongest witness of the truthfulness of our holy Orthodox Faith, giving her precedence over all those other confessions, which while calling themselves Christian, are separated from holy Orthodoxy.

But how did they celebrate holy Pascha in the very first ages of Christianity? Saint Gregory of Nyssa, very eloquently and orderly, informs us about this:

Today the whole universe, as though it were one family, assembles together for one purpose, leaving off its usual concerns as it were at a given sign, it turns to prayer. Today on the roads there are no travellers, no voyagers are to be seen upon the seas, the tiller of the soil, leaving his plough and his spade, bedecks himself in his festive clothes; the taverns stand empty, the noise of their gatherings gone, even as winter has disappeared with the advent of spring; the disturbance, confusion and strifes of life are transformed by the stillness of the feast. The poor man is adorned like the rich; the rich man is clothed in even greater magnificence than usual; the old man, like a youth, hastens to participate in the joy, the sick man overcomes his debility; children changing their apparel keep festival with their emotions because as yet they are not able to celebrate spiritually; chastity rejoices the soul because she sees the radiant, festive pledge of her hope; the mother of the family, celebrating today, rejoices with all her household; herself, her husband, and children, the servants and the domestics, they all make glad...And now the righteous one rejoices, and he who has cleansed his conscience hopes for the correction of repentance. The present day diminishes every affliction, and there is no man so miserable that he would not find consolation in the celebration of the feast.

Oh, our wonderful Paschal matins! Can anything on earth compare with the exceedingly moving and exalting celebration of our paschal Divine Services, which, as we so often observe,

draws even people who are separated from us according to faith to our churches on the night of Pascha with, as it were, an irresistible force.

On this 'sacred and all-festive night', it is as if Heaven itself, or some portion of it, drops down to us on our sinful earth, and we, each according to his measure, are granted to taste something of the sweetness of Paradise, of that blessedness of Paradise which cannot be expressed in human tongues, but which awaits all true Christians in the future life.

In what does the core cause of this luminous, paschal joy consist?

In that of which we chant in the paschal hymns: 'Christ God hath brought us from death unto life, and from earth unto Heaven as we sing the triumphal hymn.'

The cause of our radiant joy is this, that by the Resurrection of Christ evil has been conquered, the consequences of evil have been conquered, as has our most evil enemy - death; and from this sinful earth, which has been filled with evil, we have been raised up to Heaven.

By the Resurrection of Christ, we have been delivered from the gloomy power of Hades, and there has been granted unto us the possibility of another eternal and blessed life.

Celebrating this victory over death and Hades, the holy Church calls us to participate in her hymn of triumph 'We celebrate the death of death, the destruction of Hades, the beginning of an everlasting life...'. St. Gregory the Theologian teaches:

Today is salvation come unto the world, to that which is visible, and to that which is invisible. Christ is risen from the dead, rise with Him. Christ is returned again to Himself, return ye. Christ is freed from the tomb, be freed from the bond of sin. The gates of hell are opened, and death is destroyed, and the old Adam is put aside, and the New is fulfilled; if any man be in Christ he is a new creature; be renewed.

'Let us then celebrate this most great and luminous festival', Saint John Chrysostom cries out, 'in which the Lord is risen! Let us celebrate it radiantly and reverently, for the Lord is risen and

hath raised up the world with Him’.

What does our joyfulness on the day of the Paschal feast signify, what does our experience of radiant exaltation during the paschal mattins mean?

Is it not the clear voice, which proceeds from the depths of our inner consciousness, and which says that our usual, day-to-day life, which we live on earth, is not the real life, for which we were fore-ordained; that our soul strives towards another life, namely one of luminous blessedness, the possibility of which the Lord has granted us through His Resurrection, a life free of the bonds of sin, a pure life, a heavenly one, such is our real joy, our real blessedness; real happiness is not on earth, but in heaven – not in the earthly but in the heavenly.

And because of this, we must indignantly sweep away from ourselves, and resolutely reject, everything that binds us strongly to the earth, which makes us ourselves ‘earthly’, which makes us unable to raise ourselves to Heaven, which makes us insensitive to the heavenly world and the spiritual.

We were not created for this corruptible world, but for the eternal, incorruptible life, which the Lord, having liberated us from the power of sin, grants us anew through His Resurrection.

As we radiantly celebrate the joy of Holy Pascha, while we are yet able to, let us guard ourselves against every pernicious influence of a world, which does not accept the Resurrection of Christ.

Let us flee from all the numberless allurements, which from all sides now trap dissipated souls; let us be careful that we remain in the closest union with the true Church; let us prepare ourselves for the eternal, incorrupt life, which has been prepared for us through the Lord’s Resurrection, joyously chanting together with all the faithful the hymn of victory:

O PASCHA OF INCORRUPTION - SALVATION OF THE
WORLD!



Questioning the Calendar

By Monk John

Completion from previous issue:

7. The common Paschalion continued to be observed by the Church of Rome after its separation from the Orthodox Church up until the calendar reform by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. The Gregorian calendar was immediately recognized as a useless chronological device. It is to the credit of Vatican diplomats that it has not only been accepted by the Protestants but has also become the universal civil calendar.

The motives of the counter-reformation pontiff for reforming the calendar are open to question. He served a *Te Deum* in gratitude for the St. Bartholemew Day massacre in France and sponsored the Unia of Brest. The Uniates, incidentally, were permitted to retain the Orthodox calendar and Paschalion; submission to the Pope was more important than celebrating feasts on the same day with him.

A series of Orthodox Councils promptly condemned the Gregorian calendar. The Orthodox Churches remained faithful to 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. In 1902-04, as innovationism began to make itself felt, all of the local Orthodox Churches replied to an inquiry from the Ecumenical Patriarchate unanimously rejecting any reform of the Church calendar.

In the aftermath of World War I worldly forces alien to the Church made their impact felt in the life of the Church: the Bolsheviks in Russia, Western politics and Attaturk in Constantinople. Protestant ideas underlying ecumenism are embraced by the Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920 *To the Christian Churches of the Whole World*, Orthodox and heterodox, which proposes the adoption of a common calendar as a first step towards a union of 'churches'.

In 1923 Patriarch Meletios IV (Metaxakis), after his uncanonical election, presided over the openly innovationist and ecumenist Pan-Orthodox Congress, consisting of 6 bishops, one archimandrite and a layman. At the same time the council of the renovationist 'Living Church' in Soviet Russia deposed and

defrocked the imprisoned Patriarch Saint Tikhon. Both gatherings proposed innovations in the life of the Church.

In 1924, the hierarchies of Constantinople, Cyprus, Greece and Romania arbitrarily imposed the 'corrected' calendar on their faithful.

All the conniving of the Bolsheviks and innovationists did not succeed in forcing the Orthodox Church of Russia to violate Patriarch Tikhon's decree (November, 1923) which set aside changes in the Church's calendar.

The innovationists of the Phanarion recognized the renovationist 'Living Church' as the official Russian Church, and urged Metropolitan Sergius and his Temporary Synod to join them. Only after World War II, when the 'Living Church', along with the Uniates in the Soviet Union, had been absorbed by the Moscow Patriarchate, did Constantinople, along with the other Eastern Orthodox Patriarchates, enter into communion with Patriarch Alexis I. Jerusalem, the Mother of Churches, and the Churches of Serbia and Georgia likewise have remained faithful to the traditional Orthodox Church calendar.

In 1948, Archbishop St. Seraphim (Sobolev) delivered an address to the Pan-Orthodox Conference in Moscow, boycotted by Constantinople. He presents the history of the calendar reform, its violations of traditional norms and consistent rejection by the Orthodox Church from the 16th to the 20th century. He also cites the astronomical charts and scientific data compiled by Prof. Bolotov and other Russian scholars which totally discredit the Gregorian calendar and demonstrate the validity of the traditional Church calendar and Paschalion.

We might add, that thirty years later the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. published A.N. Zelinsky's exposition of the traditional Church calendar and Paschalion as an unsurpassed achievement of chronological science; he compares the Gregorian reform to an amateur smearing paint on a masterpiece of art. St. Seraphim concludes with the appeal:

We must remain firmly united with these Orthodox Churches, without any compromise, keeping the old calendar in the life of our church, following the terms of the Canons, which must remain unshaken, for they are one of the foundations for the existence of our Orthodox Church.

The purpose of the calendar, as noted above, is to provide for the celebration of the feasts by Orthodox Christians everywhere ‘on one and the same day’. The specifically stated purpose of the calendar reform uses this definition (ὅρος) of the Œcumenical Council in Nicæa to express exactly the opposite: celebrating the great feasts together with the those who have separated themselves from the Orthodox Church, and seeking reconciliation with them. This goal has been openly and consistently pursued by the ecumenists ever since.

The hierarchies of the local Churches compromised in order to preserve at least an appearance of unity. Persons with spiritual authority, who disagreed – and whose protests fell on deaf ears – by compromising keep the people in obedience to the hierarchy; this leaves the innovationists free to continue trying to reconcile Light with darkness.

Among the faithful of the local Churches that adopted the calendar reform, however, there were those whose conscience did not permit them to make such compromises.

As in former periods of strife over heresy, those in high positions, after taking it upon themselves to introduce uncanonical innovations, also assumed the role of prosecutor, judge and executioner for those who resisted them. They offer a ‘unia’: continue observing the Church calendar but remain in communion with the new calendar hierarchy and leave them free to pursue the path they have chosen. Submission to their ‘canonical’ authority is more important than celebrating the feasts with them ‘on one and the same day’.

The ‘Old Calendarists’ were defrocked, excommunicated and declared ‘schismatics’, ‘outside the Church’. Wherever possible they were subjected to brutal suppression by the secular authorities. Their witness, officially ignored or dismissed as ignorant fanaticism, has been sealed with Martyrs’ blood.

Strengthened by the appearance of the Holy Cross on the Feast of its Exaltation in Athens, September 14/27, 1925, and many other miracles and signs, those who chose to remain faithful to the traditions of the Church endured. They were guided by the confessor Hierarchs St. Chrysostomos of Florina in Greece and St. Glykerios in Romania, the disciples of St. Seraphim (Sobolev) in Bulgaria, and many other confessor-pastors with charismatic gifts.

The extremist policies of the innovationists, however, made their mark, and those in resistance to innovationist ecumenism suffer from internal divisions. We see the same phenomenon in the past: e.g., the schism among those opposing Arianism in Antioch, dissension among those in the resistance to Iconoclasm recorded in the letters of St. Theodore the Studite and the life of St. Methodius of Constantinople.

The innovationist ecumenists, acting as representatives of the local Churches, continue to sign documents, participate in organisations, dialogues, demonstrations and “prayers” with the heterodox and other religions. Their official statements and actions give the impression that Orthodox Christianity is simply one of the many traditions in the Pantheon of world religions.

In the name of unity and peace, they made their spectacle in Kolymvari, Crete (June 2016), are preparing a ‘common Paschalion’ with the Papacy, and with increasing boldness claim the Ecumenical Patriarch is first without equal in Orthodoxy.

At the same time open breaches have opened between the hierarchies of the local Churches, and Metropolitan Onufry with his faithful in the Ukraine have been cut off and subjected to suppression. Already back in 1977, St. Justin (Popovich) of Chelie issued his appeal ‘to convoke a truly ecumenical council’, which could and should consider the ‘question of ecumenism’. He continues:

This, properly speaking, is an ecclesiological question concerning the Church as theandric unity and organism, a unity and organism that are placed in doubt by contemporary ecumenical syncretism. It is also related to the question of man, for whom the nihilism of contemporary, and especially atheistic, ideologies has dug a grave without hope of resurrection.

The New Martyr St. Cyril of Kazan replied to Metropolitan Sergius’ ‘canonical injunctions’ that the life of the Church in our days is not being guided by the Holy Canons. Situations arise in which the conscience of a faithful believer does not permit him to commune with a hierarchy he clearly sees going astray. He awaits the judgement of a competent Church council or other providential events to manifest God’s Will. There are many edifying examples in the lives of the Saints and Church history, and the Holy Canons provide for such situations.

For a thoroughly documented account of the above, see the book ‘One Hundred Years Since the Calendar Reform (1924-2024)’ by Metropolitan Clement of the GOC of Larissa and Platamon. The English translation, however, does not include the notes for the sources quoted and the bibliography in the Greek original.

Now what are we poor, miserable sinners supposed to do? Because of our sins, the Light of Christ is not visible in our lives for others to see. Without passing judgement on anyone, striving to keep our conscience pure in harmony with the Gospels and Apostolic Tradition, with pain of heart and abundant tears, are we not called to beseech the Lord and Head of the Church to resolve the scandals which so sorely afflict Her?

8. ‘What to do?’ is the title of the concluding section of the article, in which a different solution is recommended.

We noted above the author’s affirmation that ‘the Church has always regarded the determination of the date of Pascha as a question of church discipline and not astronomical science’ [p.26b].

But now he points to the growing accumulation over past and future centuries of the discrepancy between the calendar and astronomical events and warns us:

It is easy to realize that one day we will celebrate Pascha in the summer, in the fall or even in the winter, although in the Northern hemisphere (that is Jerusalem) it must be a spring celebration.... So as not to let our calendar turn into total nonsense, at some point the calendar must be reformed. And if this is already clear, we must ask ourselves, why not do this as soon as possible?

He also points out that the ‘mixed calendar’ – that is the civil calendar with the Orthodox Paschalion – currently followed by some Orthodox communities faces the same prospect. Eventually their Pascha will come on the same day as Christmas.

Our author recommends eliminating February 29 in a series of leap years in order to keep the calendar in harmony with the seasons of the year [pp. 28-29]. By adopting the device used by the Gregorian Calendar every 400 years, the traditional Julian calendar and Paschalion would be retained without the shock of erasing a block of days.

His proposal gives rise to a number of important questions which are not easy to answer.

a. In keeping with the divine revelation given to the Prophet Moses the first Passover was celebrated in Egypt on the evening of the 14th day of the first month, when the Angel of death passed over the homes which were marked by the blood of the Paschal lamb (Ex. 12:1-2, 6 & 14). Was this the day of the full moon or the 14th day after the visible appearance of the new moon?

b. The solar year has more days than twelve lunar months. Epact, the number of days from the new moon to the first day of the first calendar month, is an essential factor used in the Paschalion for designating the date of the Nomikon Pascha. The arbitrary elimination of calendar days shortens the solar year, disrupts the consecutive flow of the cycles of solar and lunar years and changes epact. This is one of the major defects of the Gregorian calendar. This would disrupt the established formula for determining the date of the Nomikon Pascha, introducing confusion into the Paschalion, which now absorbs a variety of variables, including discrepancies that creep in over the centuries. The way in which the Holy Fathers ordained celebrating Holy Pascha has a validity that survives over the ages. Do we think we can do better?

c. In Jerusalem, at least for a few more centuries, Pascha will continue to be celebrated in the Spring, and we pray the Holy Fire will continue to appear at the Lord's Sepulchre on Great Saturday. So, at this moment, how urgent is the need to solve problems foreseen by calculating hundreds of years in advance?

d. Moreover, in our endeavours 'to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace', is it really up to us to tamper with such matters?

e. Finally, a practical question: given the current situation in the Orthodox Church, where and how and by whom is any effective change in the traditional calendar to be undertaken?

This having been said, we can wait to see whether or not this proposal is inspired by God as a heavenly blessing to bring peace to a grievously troubled Church on earth.

THE VENERATION OF THE VIRGIN MARY

BY PROTOPRESBYTER MICHAEL POLSKY

VI. THE GREATNESS OF THE ALL-HOLY VIRGIN MARY

1. The Virgin Mary and the Angels.

The All-holy Virgin Mary is, before God, higher than all the saints of heaven. God was well-pleased to be a Child and to rest in the womb and in the arms of the Virgin. He exchanged His cherubic throne in the heavens for a new throne on earth: the Virgin. Thus 'He Who sitteth upon the Cherubim' (Esaias 37:16) made the All-holy Virgin 'more honourable than the Cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim', because the new nature which He took on was not received from the angels, 'but He took on Him the seed of Abraham' (Hebrews 2:16) of the All-holy Virgin.

Human nature, taken on by the Son of God, was glorified by the resurrection, the ascension and its session at the right hand of God in Christ (Mark 16:19), and it was raised up and supremely exalted higher than all the angels. This nature in God the angels themselves cannot but worship.

By His incarnation the Lord quickened us, but first of all among all human nature His own Mother. Being found in her, He deified her, and in leaving her, He left her still deified.

Such great grace, as the All-holy Virgin Mary received, no one in the world has ever received nor can receive. Alone among all created beings, she is the most exalted bearer of the 'power of the Most High', for the Lord manifested in her the unique and greatest wonder of His condescension to the race of man, the incarnation. And this new creation was in no way less than the first creation of the world and of man itself. And the Virgin became closer to God than the highest of all creation.

Her unity with God did not come about as is the way with all the saints by grace alone, but in a way inherent in the human nature which the Son of God took from her, and in which He Himself abode in the very being of His Divine nature.

Besides this, the Mother of the Lord, while circumventing married life, combined virginity and motherhood in herself. In her the nature of women independently and integrally, or rather chastely, without man and without passion, fulfilled its purpose to give birth to children.

Virginity received its crown and highest award; passionlessness likened her to the angels, the bodiless beings, whom all the saints strive to emulate by this virtue. And belief in her conceiving supernaturally, as well as the very passionlessness of her life itself, placed her above nature.

And the one, who was thus first made a 'partaker of the Divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4), became higher than the Angels and was made the subject of their wonder, of their reverence and of their glorification. The ministers of God [the angels] cannot but find that this Ministress of God surpasses them, for they have given God nothing of their nature, and have not been in such a relationship with God as to partake of His Own nature, as she has done.

The nature of mankind was, in God incarnate, placed higher than the angels. This is why the Virgin, from whom He took that nature, has become higher than the angels. Thus 'the Mighty One hath done great things' for her.

With particular honour God leads man in the All-holy Virgin up unto Himself and does so before the angels, so that His holy likeness, which had been disfigured by the fallen angels, might be displayed before all the angels in victory, triumphant and saved.

2. The Virgin Mary's Significance in Our Salvation.

If not Mary, who first received the salvation of the New Testament, not rejecting it but accepting it with faith? To whose faith are we obliged for our salvation? For whom did this faith of Mary's accept the Saviour? For whom is this faith of Mary's saving, if not for the whole race of man? The faith of each man saves him alone, yet his prayer of faith can help many; but it was a faith offered from all peoples and saving for all mankind which only Mary could offer and which could be offered only by her alone, as being the one who herself ministered at God's incarnation.

The Lord does not save us without our participation, nor does He do it by force. Having granted man freewill, He does not require him to submit to Himself, but He calls, He awaits his conversion, He seeks a voluntary acceptance of salvation. He stands at the door,

knocks and waits, that one might hear His voice and open the door to Him, and only then does He enter (Revelation 3:10).

Therefore even the very initial act of salvation, the incarnation of the Son of God, was achieved not by the forcible entry of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High into the Virgin, but rather through the salutation of the Virgin with the good tidings, through an appeal to her faith, and after she had expressed her voluntary agreement with it.

Thus salvation and the incarnation were achieved not only by the fact that God alone desired this, but also by the fact that man himself, in the person of the Virgin Mary, had expressed his consent to this. In her Christ first of all saved us. And she saves us all in Christ.

In this way, as the salvation of man directly depends on man's will, on the one hand we are obliged to the All-holy Virgin Mary for our salvation, and her significance in the work of our salvation is of the first order and enormous. At the Annunciation, when the Lord knocked, she heard His voice and opened the door for the salvation of all.

3. 'All-holy Theotokos, save us.'

There is no one who served more in Christ in the good work of our salvation than the All-holy Virgin Mary. For this reason the prayerful address, 'All-holy Theotokos, save us,' always has only one meaning, which is implicit in it, and that is, 'save us in Christ, for thou hast already done this, for in Christ thou hast already saved us.' She, who has brought us to salvation in Christ, is alone more than worthy among all the saints, to receive the petition and prayerful supplication: 'save us'.

Because, on behalf of mankind, the Virgin offered everything to God for the salvation of man, so she is a support to man's efforts, and in human perception, which is granted us for our salvation, she is the closest associate in the work of our salvation. After her, through her and with her help, we are raised up to heaven. She is closer than all the saints to people, a mediatrix before God possessing the most praeter-perfect human nature, and one who, out of love for and compassion for people, and for the sake of their salvation, lent flesh and blood to God.

Chosen of all generations, blessed among women, uniquely from amongst all, as one who has obtained grace from God, as the

elect bride of the All-holy Spirit, she possesses the most powerful faith among all the sons and daughters of man, and the deepest humility among all; she among all peoples was the most good-hearted on account of her love and compassion. And she dwells with God, living with all her feelings, virtues and powers, ready to help everyone that calls upon her.

At the moment of her Dormition, the All-holy Virgin not only lost nothing of her powers, or of all that she had received from God, but in the power of that supernatural faith, by which all is granted (for ‘all things are possible to him that believeth’ – Mark 9:23), she is the most powerful helper and intercessor for the race of man.

Just as on earth, so also in the heavens the Lord works wonders for the good and salvation of people through the loving mediation of His mother. Neither the Lord, nor the All-holy Virgin lost anything of their capabilities or of their powers in being taken up into heaven from earth. Her mediation, and the miracles which He works through that mediation, can never be cut short.

We are her kinsfolk according to the flesh, her brothers, sisters and children according to the statement of her Son, and we are related to her according to our nature, and through her mediation for us with her Son. And on account of this, her love towards us is that of a kinswoman, close, heartfelt and tender. She feels this more than we do, for she is aware of it even though we are not and cannot comprehend it.

To be continued in the next issue.



HELP!

WE ALL KNOW the necessity of humility and repentance. But first we must be able to see our own sins, where we fail, so that we can repent. Do we recognise them, or do we excuse and justify ourselves? Perhaps we think they are not important; because we fail again and again in the same way, we are accustomed to our sins. It is just part of us – we expect to fall into the same sins again. It is pleasanter to look at other people’s sins, and think that they are much worse than ours. Are we satisfied to remain as we are, since there is little hope of improvement?

We go to church occasionally, sometimes take Communion, listen to the sermon, pray if we think of it. We can't be saints; we're not born that way. We would like to be more holy, but perhaps it's more comfortable to stay the way we are.

Listen to what Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich (author of *The Prologue from Ochrid*, and now glorified as a Saint by the Serbian Church) has to say:

Sin has made your souls as stiff as icy frost. Like last year's snow, upon which new snow falls, so does your sin of last year and the years before lie dead-still, providing a bed for the sin of today and tomorrow. The cold ground and the cold fog are piling up snow upon snow and ice upon ice between you and your sun. Who will absolve your sins, and who will thaw your icy hatefulness? In vain do you yourselves forgive your own sins. By forgiving your own sins you make ice of the snow, providing an even smoother bed for new snow. The light of the triradiate Godhead alone can absolve your sins, just as the sun alone can melt the snow on the mountain, thaw the snow and ice, and bring forth flowers out of the black earth.¹

What are the usual everyday sins which we ignore, excuse, forgive? Self-justification is so easy. We do it all the time.

We are offended – the other person was nasty.

We offended someone else – they were in the wrong.

We didn't lend a hand or help where there was a need – we were busy or too tired.

We expected praise, or at least some recognition of our success – we deserved it.

We boasted a little – we are taught from childhood to be proud of our achievements.

We were irritable or angry – it was enough to provoke anyone.

We were depressed – who wouldn't be in such a terrible situation?

We didn't go forward to speak to someone who was shy or ill at ease – we didn't know what to say because we did not know him.

¹ Rev. Todor Mica, Rev. Stevan Scott (trans.) *Prayers by the Lake by St. Nikolai of Ochrid and Zica* (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2021) pp 112-113.

We had impure thoughts – that’s normal.

We indulged in our favourite food, drink, in smoking or extra sleep – now and again we have to do it to keep going.

We indulged in idle gossip – everybody does it.

We told lies – white lies are so excusable.

We didn’t help someone with a spiritual problem – we didn’t know how to.

We watched television frequently – there was nothing else to do.

We had an expensive holiday – we needed relaxation.

We bought good clothes – we must look nice.

We like going to parties – one must please one’s friends.

We listened to criticism of other people – we couldn’t stop it.

We criticised others – we couldn’t approve of what they did.

We borrowed something and did not give it back – we forgot.

We didn’t thank someone for a gift or for help – we forgot, and in any case nobody does these days.

We didn’t keep our promise – circumstances changed.

We rely on ourselves, our own actions, our judgments, our plans – that’s the way we were brought up.

We dislike or even hate our enemies – they hated us first.

We were inattentive during prayers or in church – we were too tired to concentrate.

The list is endless. It is even possible for us to excuse, at least partially, major sins. Otherwise we should have to face ourselves as we really are, and that would be most unpleasant. We don’t want to know ourselves as God knows us. We want to think highly of ourselves as our nearest friends do. Yet somehow there is a niggling doubt that all is not right, that self-justification is itself a sin. We’ve done it for years. How can we break free?

There is only one way. To cry out, to beg, to plead, to weep for help. Not only must we realise that we are nothing (‘dust and ashes’, as the great Abraham said), but also that we can do nothing. We must believe in our hearts the words of Christ:

‘Without Me ye can do nothing,’ at the same time, trusting in His loving aid, hoping that we can be changed, for He also said: ‘With God nothing is impossible.’ ‘Ask and ye shall receive.’

So we must ask repeatedly, like the importunate widow, that we should see our sins, black as they are, and be given the gift of repentance – that we should accuse rather than justify ourselves. We need God’s help every minute of every day.

This is a slow process, because God in His mercy allows us to see our sins as far as we are able to bear it. Only the most holy person can feel the truth that, as we say in the pre-Communion prayer, Christ came into the world to save sinners, **of whom I am the chief.**

Contributed by a reader and first published in the November 1994 issue of ‘The Shepherd’.



A PRAYER FOR THE LAPSED

O Lord God, Heavenly King, in Whom we all have our beginning and our end, we come to Thee with humble heart and contrite spirit, entreating mercy, salvation and help in time of need. In Thine infinite power, look Thou with mercy and compassion on the hearts of those held in a cruel spiritual captivity, our brethren who have erred, strayed, lapsed or estranged themselves from the full participation in the life of Thy Church. Restrain their captors, the evil ones, from bringing them further harm. Cause them to relent and release them. Restore our brethren to the full and saving participation in the life of Thy Church, that with them we may all lift up our voices in prayers of thanksgiving and praise to Thee, O Heavenly Father, our merciful Benefactor. For Thou are the King of Peace and the Giver of life, to Thee we send up glory together with Thine Only-Begotten Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

THE COMING MONTH

THIS YEAR, all of April falls within the forty-day long feast of the Lord's Resurrection.

Bright Week or New Week, is kept in a special way, with no readings from the Psalter, with the doors of the iconostas open, with the oft-repeated chanting of the troparion, and with a special Great Prokeimenon every day at Vespers.

On **Thomas Sunday**, we have in the Apostle's confession a confirmation of the truth of the Resurrection, but this truth is also confirmed by the Saviour's appearing to Thomas bearing the wounds of the crucifixion, demonstrating that Thomas saw and was able to touch the body which had been crucified and buried and that Christ had not appeared to him with the appearance of a body or in some other body. This gives us confirmation regarding the future resurrection of our own bodies, and instructs to treat them and to act with them properly.

On **Myrrh-bearer's Sunday** we pay tribute to the extraordinary love of these women, who were granted to become the first witnesses of the Resurrection. Their love for Christ again teaches us how we should strive to love Him. But again, the Church does not leave us without confirmation of the truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ.

The Myrrh-bearing Women were not only the first to meet the Risen Saviour, but they had also been witnesses of His Passion, His death and His burial. To underline the fact of the bodily resurrection, the Church includes in her hymns on this day Saint Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus the disciple by night, who had taken the body down from the Cross, prepared it as best they could in the short time available before the Sabbath, and laid it in the tomb. These people, better than any others knew that He had died, and they became preachers of His Resurrection, thus bearing witness to the words we profess daily in the Creed: (He) 'was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried; and arose again on the third day.'

On the **Sunday of the Paralytic**, the Gospel reading at the Divine Liturgy tells us of the healing of the man who had been paralysed for 38 years and whom the Saviour found waiting for the moving of the waters at the Sheep Pool in Jerusalem. The event is not immediately connected with Christ's Resurrection, in fact it happened before He was crucified, but it is celebrated within the paschal period, both because it occurred within the Jewish Pentecost (the fifty days between Passover and the feast of Pentecost) and because the Church sees this miracle an an expression of the renewal of the life of mankind through the resurrection of Christ.

On this and the next two Sundays, with regard to this renewal we see two themes repeated: a) the mention of water, showing us that our renewal is granted us through Holy Baptism; b) the emphasis that the Healer is a man, thus showing us that the victory over the powers of evil was won for us by one of our kind, the Man, Jesus Christ, and so in His loving condescension God has granted our kind the victory.

The **Sunday of the Samaritan Woman** tells of the Saviour's meeting with the Samaritan Woman at the well of Jacob. In this instance, she is not healed of a physical infirmity but of a spiritual one, for she had led a shamelessly sinful life. And it is to this sinful woman that the Saviour imparts some of the fundamental teaching about the witness of His Church, primarily that true worshippers worship the Father 'in spirit and in truth', He also assures us, by His providential meeting with this woman, that He always meets those who sincerely seek after the truth. He speaks of the thirst which we experience which may be quenched by the Water He gives, but also in this history He tells us of the thirst which He has for our salvation.

On the Wednesday before the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman, we have another commemoration which is part of the paschal cycle of services: **Mid-Pentecost**. That day marks the mid-point between Easter Day and Pentecost Sunday, but the Gospel reading refers back to an event in the life of the Saviour, when in the midst of the feast of Tabernacles (rather than Pentecost), He preached concerning His Divine mission and again spoke of water, this time referring to the grace-filled Christian teaching and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which were to be poured out upon the true believers. The feast itself, which is

kept within Pascha for eight days, dates back to the fourth century.

In the fifth century St Anatolius of Constantinople wrote hymns for the feast, as did St Andrew of Crete in the seventh century, St John of Damascus in the eighth and St Theophanes in the ninth – these hymns are still part of our liturgy for the festival.

In the Old Testament celebration of the feast of Tabernacles, on the eighth day, the High Priest would lead a procession from the Temple of Solomon to the Pool of Siloam, from which he would take water in a golden vessel. At the sound of a trumpet the procession would return to the Temple, where the water was mixed with wine and he would sanctify the altar. Today in the Orthodox Church, we have the Lesser Blessing of waters on the feast, showing the sanctification granted in the New Testament Church through the outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit.

Among the Saints celebrated in April, we have:

Saint George of Mytilene (7th/20th). He became a monk in his youth and, through his struggles and through Grace, achieved a state of great purity and of humility. He also became renowned for his love and care for the poor, and this was brought to the notice of the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, and thus St George came to be appointed Bishop of the town of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos. As the pastor of his flock, it became evident that he had been granted the gift of healing and of casting out unclean spirits. During the reign of Leo the Armenian, who promoted the iconoclastic heresy, St George remained staunchly Orthodox and, because of his veneration of the icons and because he boldly convicted the Emperor of his errors, he was sent into exile to Kherson, where in deep old age he died in about the year 816.

The **Holy Martyr Thomais** (13th/26th) was born in Alexandria and married to a fisherman. She was distinguished by her chastemindedness, her meekness and guilelessness. Because of his occupation, her husband was often away from home, and her father-in-law became darkened with a passionate carnal desire for Thomais. When she resisted his advances, he murdered her, and thus she won a martyr's crown for her contest for the Christian virtue of chastity. She

died in the year 476 A.D. Her sacred relics were taken by the desert father, Abba Daniel, to Scetis, where honouring her contest for purity, he laid them in the cemetery for the priests. Later they were taken to the Imperial City of Constantinople, and she is much resorted to in prayer by those who are troubled by carnal passions.

NEWS from the Richmond Diocese of the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece

METROPOLITAN AMBROSE'S VISIT

METROPOLITAN Ambrose arrived in the UK on 27th February and was driven to the Brotherhood by Fr. Deacon Ioan Turcu, arriving at the end of the Presanctified Liturgy. In the evening, he served Little Compline with the Akathist Hymn assisted by Priestmonk Sabbas and Priest Evangelos Liassi; the Metropolitan gave an informative homily about the history and significance of the Akathist Hymn.

On Saturday 15th/28th February, Saint Theodore Saturday, the Metropolitan attended the Divine Liturgy, and chaired a meeting of the Convent of the Annunciation trustees.

During the Matins of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, **Priest Simion Desrobitu** and **Subdeacon Alexandru Radu Pop** were received by chrismation and the reading of the prayers of χειροθεσία over Fr. Simion. Fr. Simion and Subdeacon Alexandru were previously clergymen of the Romanian Patriarchate. Metropolitan Ambrose also received Alexandru **Andrei Pop** and **Maria Sofia Pop** by chrismation.

The concelebrants at the hierarchical Divine Liturgy were Archimandrite Daniel (Toyne), Priest Gabriel Lawani, Priest Borislav Popov, Priestmonk Sabbas, Priest Evangelos Liassi and the newly-received Priest Simion Desrobitu and Deacon Ioan

Turcu. The epistle was read in Romanian by the newly-received subdeacon Alexandru and in English by Reader Gregory Ferguson.

In his sermon, Metropolitan Ambrose spoke about the need to define ourselves by using the term 'True' or 'Genuine' Orthodox Christians as the word 'Orthodox' sadly means so little given the situation in World Orthodoxy today.

At the end of the Liturgy, Metropolitan Ambrose led the traditional Sunday of Orthodoxy procession around the church, with the faithful carrying icons. During the parish breakfast, the Metropolitan took the chance to speak to parishioners before returning to London.

May Fr. Simion and Subdeacon Alexandru be an example for other clergy to follow. May they be granted many years of service in the Church of Christ!

CHRISMATION

ON the Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas (23rd Feb/8th March) **Charalambous Papas** was received into the Genuine Orthodox Church by chrismation, the celebrant was Priest Evangelos Liassi. Charalambous was formerly a member of the Greek Archdiocese of Thyateira – may God reward him for his confession of the faith.

BAPTISM

On Saturday 8th/21st March, **Panagiotes Nteskas**, the infant son of **Pavlos** and **Ann Nteskas**, was baptised at St. Edward's Church; the celebrant was Priestmonk Sabbas and the Godfather was **Rafail Mazmanides**. The Service of Churching was held after the baptism, followed by a celebratory meal in the Old Mortuary. We congratulate the newly-baptised Panagiotes and his parents.

GIFT TO THE CHURCH

AN anonymous donor has donated a beautiful hand-made gold and enamelled insert designed to fit inside the reliquary of

Saint Edward the Martyr. The work was carried out in Romania by the renowned church craftsman Adrian Plesca; we pray that it will bring many blessings to the generous donor.

SAINT TRYPHON GARDENING GROUP

On Saturday 28th February, the St. Tryphon Gardening Group met and built the Paschal Bonfire. We are extremely grateful for their hard work - may God bless them!

VOLUNTEERS

On Monday 16th March, **John Crask, Mark Slater and Moses Devenish** spent the best part of the day clearing and rotavating the ground in the vegetable patch in preparation for planting. May God bless them for their labour of love.

VISITORS

On Saturday 14th March **Emmanuel Wedlock** brought a group of about eight people to see the church. They arrived during Vespers and were given hospitality in the exhibition room at the end of the service; they later returned to the church to pray at the Shrine of Saint Edward.

Practical Tip

IF, as is to be hoped, during Great Lent, you have developed a discipline of spiritual reading, do not abandon it now that we have reached Pascha. Supplement your daily prayers with a little spiritual reading, if only a page or two a day. This will nourish you spiritually and enlighten you. It is always hard to survive on a subsistence diet, and yet many Christians try to do exactly that spiritually by limiting themselves just to church attendance or formal reading of prayers at home, but their observance is never informed and illumined because it is not backed up with spiritual reading. If you are in any doubt regarding what to read ask the advice of your pastor or father confessor.